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# Northern spring: The flowering of Canadian literature in English

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# **Northern spring: The flowering of Canadian literature in English**

by George Woodcock

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### *Note about the author*

George Woodcock was born in Winnipeg, Manitoba, in 1912. He completed his education and launched his career as a writer and editor in Britain, resuming residence in Canada in 1949.

Mr. Woodcock is the author of 50 books on such subjects as anarchism, George Orwell, Canadian society, the Hudson's Bay Company, as well as narratives of his travel in Mexico and South America and India; and volumes of poetry. It is as one of the founders and first editor of *Canadian Literature*, the senior academic journal devoted to this subject, that he has performed an especially valuable service. From the first issue in 1959, encouraging and expecting an informed, articulate assessment by his contributors, Mr. Woodcock, more than any other figure in modern Canadian letters, has influenced the opportunities for artists and academicians in Canada to appraise and thus to celebrate their national literature.

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*Note* — *Reference Series* No. 47 covers French-Canadian literature.



### *The early years*

One of the anecdotes often told by literary historians in Canada relates to the late nineteenth century poet, Archibald Lampman, who in 1880 read with delight a book called *Orion*, the first poems of another Canadian writer, Charles G.D. Roberts. It seemed to Lampman that Roberts showed an ability to write of the Canadian landscape as well as the English poets wrote of theirs, and he remarked: "It seemed to me a wonderful thing that such a work could be done by a Canadian, by a young man, one of ourselves."

At the same time Lampman also made a remark which has not so often been quoted. "A good deal is being said as to whether a Canadian literature exists. Of course it does not." And, at the time he was writing, just about a century ago, what he said was correct.

Ever since the British North American colonies came together in 1867 to form the Confederation of Canada, cultural nationalists like D'Arcy McGee had been talking of the need for a national literature. Indeed, the thought had been expressed even before Confederation when in 1864 an Upper Canadian clergyman named Edward Hartley Dewart published an anthology entitled *Selections from the Canadian Poets*, and in his introduction declared:

"A national literature is an essential element in the formation of national character. It is not merely the record of a country's mental progress: it is the expression of its intellectual life, the bond of national unity and the guide of national energy."

But a literature is not created by a collective act of will, and for many years Canadian writers were enslaved by the pioneer mentality, which seeks to recreate in a hostile wilderness the institutions and the cultural patterns of the lost homeland. Canadian poetry and fiction, until late in the nineteenth century, were derivative in their form and imagery, while other literary genres, like drama and criticism, hardly existed at all.

It was Lampman and his friends and contemporaries, Charles G.D. Roberts, Bliss Carman and Duncan Campbell Scott, who realized that their inspiration must be found at home. They wrote the first poetry that took the Canadian landscape and the life people lived in it as the source of their

imagery; starting off with a style derived from the English Romantics, the best of them recognized in the end that their new content demanded a new idiom. The first experimental Canadian poetry in a modernist sense was written by Roberts and Scott in their later years, while Roberts because of his animal stories, and Carman because of the popularity of his poetry among Americans, were the first Canadian writers to acquire an international readership.

An excellent anthology of these four men, *Poets of the Confederation*, was compiled by Malcolm Ross and published in 1960. They were the first true Canadian classics, but they hardly created a Canadian literature, for they had no immediate successors of equal stature, while Canadian fiction hardly developed at all until after the Great War. The good pre-1914 Canadian novels do not take even the fingers of a single hand to count: William Kirby's historical romance, *The Golden Dog* (1877); James de Mille's utopian fantasy, *Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder* (1888); Sara Jeannette Duncan's ironic political novel, *The Imperialist* (1904); and Stephen Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912), less a novel than a series of linked humorous stories.

### *The beginnings of a national literature*

It was really in the 1920s and 1930s that Canadian literature began to acquire a distinctive identity. In the western plains a whole school of prairie realists emerged, led by novelists like Robert J. Stead (*Grain*, 1926), Maria Ostenso (*Wild Geese*, 1925), and—most important—Frederick Philip Grove. Grove, who had already written novels in German as Felix Paul Greve, began his Canadian career with a book of essays, *Over Prairie Trails* (1922), which is still one of the best evocations of the mingling of beauty and dread in the prairie landscape, and followed them with a series of flawed, massive novels in which he applied European naturalism to the struggle of prairie farmers against both the land and their own passions. *Settlers in the Marsh* (1925) is the most darkly realist of his works, but Grove had too grandiose a mind to be a consistent naturalist, and his most ambitious book—and one of the true Canadian classics — was a symbolic epic on the onward march of mechanization, *The Master of the Mill* (1944).

Grove's urban counterpart was Morley Callaghan, who accepted the lessons of an undecorated prose learned from his friend Ernest Hemingway, and in the 1930s published a series of novels that read like laconic moralist parables, notably *Such Is My Beloved* (1934) and *They Shall Inherit the Earth* (1937); these novels admirably caught the ways of life and speech in the growing Canadian cities.

In poetry the centre of the ferment of the years between the wars was Montreal, which still had a vigorous anglophone culture. Modernism found its first Canadian expression when F.R. Scott and A.J.M. Smith worked together on the *McGill Fortnightly Review*, and published in it a kind of verse that was cosmopolitan in form, since it took cognizance of experimental trends in both Britain and the United States, but sought to locate itself firmly in a Canadian setting, and to find the rhythms of speech appropriate to the place. Because of the difficulties of publishing in the Depression years, neither Scott nor Smith brought out a book during the 1930s, but with a few other poets they published in 1936 an anthology—*New Provinces*—that marked the beginnings of Canadian modernism and also of a separate Canadian literary tradition. Smith became a great anthologist, and his collections, such as *A Book of Canadian Poetry* (1943), *The Oxford Book of Canadian Verse* (1960) and *Modern Canadian Verse* (1967), not only displayed the growing variety of Canadian poetry, but also served a critical purpose by defining a tradition, a pattern of increasingly felicitous adaptation by poets to the spirit of an emerging national culture. Smith's anthologies are still the best introductions to Canadian poetry up to the mid-1960s.

During the 1940s Montreal remained a notable centre for English-language poetry, and F.R. Scott was joined there by such younger poets as Irving Layton, Louis Dudek, P.K. Page and the English poet Patrick Anderson; while at the same time, in Toronto, Dorothy Livesay, Earle Birney and Raymond Souster were beginning to write and publish. The work of all these poets appeared in two historic Montreal journals, *Preview* and *First Statement*, which in 1945 united as *Northern Review*, and in the equally historic *Contemporary Verse*, which Alan Crawley published in Victoria and which became the centre of a poetry movement in western Canada.

The development of a national literature is dependent on a great many factors, emotional and even material. The modernist movement in poetry and the realist movement in fiction during the 1930s might have been ephemeral if the Second World War had not in many directions increased the Canadian sense of existing as a separate nation, finally detached from the old imperial links with Britain and anxious to defend itself from being absorbed into a continental culture in North America. And any national literature depends for its survival on the development of the kind of infrastructure which we often call a "literary world", meaning the kind of ambiance in which writers are in touch with each other, in which responsible criticism develops, and in which there is reasonable certainty of publications through a network of publishers, periodicals and media



willing to use literary material. That a fair number of writers should earn enough to work without having to depend on academic appointments or journalistic chores, is also one of the signs of a real literary world.

Such a world hardly existed in Canada before the mid-1960s, but the shifts in national consciousness that began during the Second World War were making it possible. In the 1940s the direction of Canadian fiction was changed by the appearance of two classic novels, Hugh MacLennan's *Barometer Rising* and Sinclair Ross's *As for Me and My House*. Ross's book was a single triumph, a sensitive study not only of the frustration of life in small prairie towns but also of the plight of the artist in a country only just emerging from a condition of pioneer philistinism. But *Barometer Rising* was the beginning of a distinguished career, for MacLennan dominated the late 1940s and the 1950s in Canadian writing with his didactic novels. They were popular because, like the quasi-epics of E.J. Pratt and the early poems of Earle Birney, they mirrored the preoccupations of a people conscious that they were coming to terms with their own land and no longer depending on any of their various "old countries". MacLennan novels like *Two Solitudes* (1945) and *The Precipice* (1948) in various ways gave fictional expression to an emerging national and nationalist consciousness, and they were widely accepted in spite of their conservative style and awkward characterization.

### *The verbal explosion*

It is symptomatic of the change in Canadian writing that since the late 1950s no single figure has dominated any area in the way MacLennan then dominated fiction. This is due mainly to the rapid coming to maturity of Canadian literature during the past quarter of a century, and the notable variegation, in kinds of writing and in ways of writing, that has accompanied it. In 1976 the noted Canadian critic, Northrop Frye, remarked on the "colossal verbal explosion that has taken place in Canada since 1960". And whether one looks at the number of books published, the number of magazines in circulation, the number of publishing houses and bookstores in operation, or the number of Canadian books read by Canadians, there is no doubt that we have seen an enormous quantitative expansion in Canadian writing.

Let me give two examples. After *Northern Review* disappeared in 1953 with the death of its editor, John Sutherland, there was no literary magazine of any substance in Canada until *Tamarack Review* was founded in 1956. *Tamarack* ceased publication in 1982 after a distinguished career; it could do so because there are now several dozen Canadian literary periodicals in existence. When I started to edit *Canadian Literature*



in 1959, it was the only critical journal in Canada, and criticism as a literary genre hardly existed. Now there are half a dozen critical magazines dealing with various aspects of writing in this country. In the same year 12 books of verse were published in Canada. By the end of the 1970s the yearly average was about ten times that number. And these books were being published by a whole underground network of small publishing houses that had come into being to meet the need of the many new, and often good, poets who were emerging.

The magazines and the publishing houses became part of that essential infrastructure of a literary world. Linked in a symbiotic way to the expansion of the literary world was the emergence of the Canada Council, the organization for the administration of public patronage without political strings. The Canada Council came into being as the result of a famous royal commission set up in 1949, under the chairmanship of Vincent Massey, later Governor General of Canada, to investigate the situation of the arts, letters and sciences. The commission sensed the groundswell of interest in literature and the other arts that would produce Northrop Frye's "explosion" a decade or so later, and its recommendations led to the establishment of the Council, which since its foundation in 1956 has been encouraging the arts in many ways that have improved both the working situations of writers and their chances of presenting their works to a responsive public. Grants of various kinds have given writers much-needed time to work without financial anxieties in a country where few writers have ever lived from their literary earnings. They have enabled magazines to survive and to publish both creative and critical writing. They have subsidized publishers willing to bring out books without guarantees of quick profits. They have sustained theatres, which in turn have employed writers, with the result that Canada, which in the past had a fine radio drama tradition, now has a young but vigorous tradition of writing for the stage.

Of course, the relationship between art patron and artist is a complex one. Patronage can always guarantee the quantity of writing or painting, as it has done in some totalitarian countries, but quality is a different matter. That cannot be produced by financing or organizing the artists. On the other hand, the good writer or artist can be encouraged where he exists by removing some of the difficulties he experiences in producing or distributing his work. In the case of Canada, the foundation of the Canada Council at just the time when Canadian writing was moving rapidly forward and outward was a happy conjunction. The rapid growth of public patronage after 1956 did not cause the "verbal explosion", but it helped the best of the writers who appeared at this time—and some of the worst

as well since no patronage system is infallible in its decisions—to have time for their work and the means of reaching an audience.

Literary historians in the future are likely to spend a great deal of time speculating why in the 1960s and 1970s there was not only a spectacular increase in the number of Canadian writers, but also a remarkable maintenance of quality. The literary landscape—once inhabited by a few isolated writers of real quality—has in the past few years become populated by scores of novelists and poets, of dramatists and critics of high, idiosyncratic talent.

Perhaps the most impressive novelist of the 1960s and 1970s was Margaret Laurence; if I had to pick a notable Canadian prose epic I would certainly choose her prairie tetralogy (for the prairies are the heartland of her characters even when they wander) from *The Stone Angel* (1964) to *The Diviners* (1975). It has a breadth of vision, an historical sense, and a largeness of texture that are unique in Canadian fiction. Margaret Laurence is also important because she exemplifies how Canadian writers at this period were breaking out of the narrower patterns of the past. Some of her crucial years were spent in Somaliland and Ghana, and she perfected her craft by writing about Africa in her novel, *This Side Jordan* (1960), and her travel book, *The Prophet's Camel Bell* (1963), before she turned a very practiced hand to writing about Canada.

Margaret Laurence was not alone in this experience of leaving Canada and returning changed and culturally enlarged. It happened to older as well as younger writers, to Earle Birney and Dorothy Livesay, to P.K. Page and Irving Layton and Al Purdy as well as to Dave Godfrey (*The New Ancestors*, 1970), Audrey Thomas (*Mrs. Blood*, 1969) and Marian Engel (*Bear*, 1976). In the case of elder poets like Birney, Livesay and Page, the remarkable second careers on which they embarked after they returned from their times abroad have been as productive as their earlier periods as young experimental poets, as can be seen from Livesay's *Ice Age* (1976), Birney's *Collected Poems* (1975) and Page's *Evening Dance of the Grey Flies* (1981). Al Purdy, Canada's great poet of place, had already written eloquently on his native Ontario and on Canada from Newfoundland to British Columbia and north to the Arctic when he set out on his world wanderings; the distillation of this mass of global experience is to be found in *Being Alive* (1978), the most representative collection of his work.

In maturing literary cultures a related phenomenon to the travelling writer is the expatriate, who goes and stays away because only thus can he get a real perspective on his native world. The Englishman Malcolm Lowry and the Irishman Brian Moore were two expatriates from other countries who came to Canada and enriched its literature with books like Lowry's

*October Ferry to Gabriola* (1970) and Moore's *The Luck of Ginger Coffey* (1960). Among the Canadians who made themselves exiles, Mavis Gallant, whose stories have appeared often in the *New Yorker*, is a good example. She has lived in Paris since 1951 and has not yet returned home (although she has been appointed writer-in-residence at the University of Toronto for six months in 1983). Many of her stories are about other expatriates, while one of her best books, *The Pegnitz Junction* (1973), is a remarkable fictional study of postwar Germany. More recently, she has reached the exile's logical goal by going back in memory to childhood and writing a superb series of stories on a past Montreal, *Home Truths* (1981). Another Canadian writer who lived long abroad was Mordecai Richler, but his novels were often set in Canada and always populated by Canadians. His period of residence abroad ended after the completion of *St. Urbain's Horseman* (1971) which, with *The Apprenticeship of Druddy Kravitz* (1959), represented the high point of Richler's achievement in giving fictional expression to the vigorous multicultural society of Montreal.

The crossing of frontiers by Canadian writers has been more than a matter of foreign travel. It has also meant expansion into previously neglected fields of writing. Serious criticism, once mainly represented by Northrop Frye (*The Anatomy of Criticism*, 1957), developed into a significant literary genre in the 1960s, and many important younger critics emerged, including Margaret Atwood (*Survival*, 1972), D.G. Jones (*Butterfly on Rock*, 1970), and W.H. New (*Articulating West*, 1972). Significantly, some of the best of these critics are themselves fine poets, and this has meant that criticism in Canada has become a genuine dialogue within the world of writers. In the theatre, there was in the 1960s a leap from radio drama to stage drama, led by writers like James Reaney (*Colours in the Dark*, 1967), George Ryga (*The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, 1967), Sharon Pollock (*Walsh*, 1973) and David Freeman (*Creeps*, 1972). Canadian stage drama has tended to be radical in sentiment as well as presentation, and to be concerned largely with minorities, the poor, the despised. Another genre—the short story—which was long neglected in Canada and for years kept going by CBC radio, re-emerged with vigour in the 1960s in the hands of writers like Alice Munro (*Dance of the Happy Shades*, 1968), W.D. Valgardson and W.P. Kinsella.

The novel was a rather conservative form in Canada until the 1960s, with only a few experimental exceptions like Howard O'Hagan's *Tay John* (1939) and Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook* (1959). But by the end of the decade experimentation of some kind had become almost *de rigueur* in prose fiction, and the result has been an enormous variation in the kinds of novel being published in Canada. Even comparatively realistic novelists



like Mordecai Richler and Margaret Laurence have played with time and memory in adventurous ways. The period saw the emergence of Margaret Atwood, whose novels like *Surfacing* (1972) and *Bodily Harm* (1981) are tight and sinewy studies of neurotic frontiers; the quasi-mythical prairie novels of Robert Kroetsch (*The Studhorse Man*, 1969); and the later novels of the ironist Robertson Davies, which moved into a rich metaphysical vein (*Fifth Business*, 1970), and *World of Wonders*, 1975). The pattern of variation has continued among younger novelists like Matt Cohen, with his excursions into rustic melodrama (*The Disinherited*, 1974) and futurism (*The Colours of War*, 1977); Jack Hodgins, with his elaborate manipulations of strange fiction and stranger fact (*The Invention of the World*, 1977); and Timothy Findley, with his elaborate pastiches of invented history (*Famous Last Words*, 1981).

In poetry the variation has been even greater, because more poets have emerged than fiction writers, and books of verse are more easily published than novels. It is hard to do more than indicate the contrasts in this crowded field. They have ranged from the ironic classicism of John Glassco (*A Point of Sky*, 1964) to the concrete idiom of B.P. Nichol (*The Martyrology*, 1972), and from the colloquial exuberance of Al Purdy to the lapidary restraint of Margaret Atwood, whose *Selected Poems* (1976) is her most substantial and representative selection. Other notable poets of recent decades have been Phyllis Webb, Leonard Cohen, John Newlove, Margaret Avison, Alden Nowland, Gwendolyn MacEwen, Michael Ondaatje and George Bowering. An especially interesting trend (it is not organized enough to be called a movement) among the younger poets has been towards a renewed return to the landscape, though in much less conventional ways than the Confederation poets a century ago. The writers representing this trend—among them some of the best of younger Canadian poets—include Patrick Lane, Dale Zieroth, Sid Marty, Tom Wayman and Susan Musgrave. They are mostly from the prairie provinces and British Columbia, and they show a westward inclination that in recent years has become very noticeable in Canadian writing.

The cultural forces of the country, like the political and economic ones, have been shifting radically in recent years, and the days when Montreal and Toronto were the literacy centres of English-speaking Canada are already in the past. Not only the West, but the maritime provinces of the Atlantic coast are producing many interesting new writers and new movements in theatre and other areas close to literature. Northrop Frye once remarked that, whatever its political shape, Canada is culturally decentralist, and Canadian writers have recently been proving it by their variety of approach, which is as much regional as it is personal.

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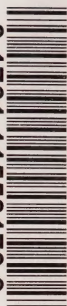




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